



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #05

American Kestrel

Falco sparverius



Taxonomy

Kingdom	-	-	-	-	Animalia
Phylum	-	-	-	-	Chordata
Subphylum	-	-	-	-	Vertebrata
Class	-	-	-	-	Aves
Subclass	-	-	-	-	Neornithes
Order	-	-	-	-	Falconiformes
Family	-	-	-	-	Falconidae
Genus	-	-	-	-	<i>Falco</i>
Species	-	-	-	-	<i>sparverius</i>
Subspecies (Caribbean)	-	-	-	-	<i>caribbaearum</i>

Identification Characteristics

Length	-	19 to 21 cm
Wingspan	-	50 to 60 cm
Weight (males)	-	102 to 120 gm
Weight (females)	-	126 to 166 gm
Facial bars	-	two
Color of tail & back	-	rusty reddish
Tail pattern	-	black band at tip

Description

The American kestrel, *Falco sparverius*, is a common falcon in the Virgin Islands. Although frequently called a "sparrow" hawk - in reference to its small size - these kestrels eat more than sparrows. Locally, the American Kestrel is also known as the killy-killy; probably because of the shrieking sounds they make.

The American Kestrel is the smallest raptor in our area. Worldwide, the only smaller species in the genus *Falco* is the Seychelles kestrel. Generally, the American Kestrel is about 20 cm long, with a wingspan of 50 to 60 cm. Males weigh from 103 to 120 g, and females between 126 and 166 g. The size is comparable to a dove. The feathers are dark brown with black and white banding on its lateral feathers. The head has a distinctive facial pattern with two black bars, one beneath the eye like a black moustache and the other toward the back of the head. Males are much more brightly colored than females a pattern known as sexual dichromatism. Feathers on the back and tail of males are splashed vivid rufous, and feathers on the shoulders are slate blue.

Females wear more subdued colors, their wings rusty brown like their back. The tail is rusty reddish and has a black band at the end.

Distribution & Habitat

The American Kestrel permanently inhabits (without seasonal migration) North and South America from near the tree line in Alaska and Canada, south to Tierra del Fuego. The bird can also be found in the West Indies, the Juan Fernandez Islands and Chile. It is largely absent from heavily forested areas, including Amazonia.

The American Kestrel nests in tree cavities, woodpecker holes, crevices of buildings, holes in banks, nest boxes or, rarely, old nests of other birds. The American Kestrel is highly adaptable behaviorally and lives just about everywhere, as long as there is some open ground for hunting and conspicuous places on which to perch (e.g., telephone wires).

It is often seen sitting on exposed wires or perches while looking for its prey. American kestrels usually mate for life. Bird lovers adore - them for their lightheartedness and playfulness. Unfortunately American Kestrel populations have

declined greatly in the Virgin Islands due to the loss of nesting habitat from both development and hurricanes.

The American Kestrel is, for the most part, not a social bird. During the mating season, males and females pair up and have joint territories. Presumably, the pair or the male defends the territory. The function of the territory may not be so much to ensure mating as to maintain a pair bond during the nesting season when the male is needed to help rear offspring.

Diet

American kestrels hunt throughout the day, but may be more active in the early morning and evening. They eat mostly lizards and large insects (mainly grasshoppers), small mammals (mice and sparrow-sized birds), sandpiper chicks, scorpions and amphibians. The American Kestrel has a large economic benefit to the islands – it helps control some of the animals we consider a nuisance such as mice and insects.

Reproduction

For up to six weeks before egg laying, females are promiscuous, mating with two or three males. Once a female settles with one mate, the pair mate frequently until egg laying. Three to seven eggs are laid (usually 4 or 5) over a period of 2 or 3 days. Eggs are white, cream or pale pink with an average size of 35 x 29 mm. Laying occurs in February.

The female does most of the incubation, but males have been known to occasionally incubate. Both sexes have brooding patches. Incubation lasts 29 – 30 days and hatched chicks are non-competitive. Once chicks have hatched, females beg food from males. The female, in turn, feeds the young for the first 20 days. After that period, chicks beg for food from males and feed themselves. After 30 days, chicks leave the nest. The family remains as a unit for some time. The survival rate of chicks is about 50% under natural conditions, but it is usually higher under better conditions (e.g., human-provided nesting boxes).

Status in the VI

The availability of nesting places (tree-cavities) may be biggest factor limiting populations of American kestrels. Their numbers may be increased by the installation of nesting boxes. However, whether or not additional nesting boxes are introduced, the bird is common.

The American Kestrels, as are all predatory birds, are protected under the Migratory Bird Act. These miniature falcons usually do not build nests of their own but rely on natural sites or those created by other birds or animals, including man made nest boxes. When built properly, the Kestrels will use their bird homes for life. The breeding season usually occurs in late winter (December through February) and summer (June - July). The nest site is usually located in the cavity of an old tree, transformer or under the eaves of buildings.

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Division of Fish and Wildlife, has an on-going project to construct and place nest boxes in suitable areas. Placement of the nest boxes is very important. The more boxes available for nesting improves the survival of the species.

What you can do to HELP

1. Nest boxes should be placed high (10 m-30 m) in areas of little disturbance. Box openings should be south or east to allow warming in the morning, but not overheating in the afternoon. Also open vegetation around the site allows for easy access to the box for the falcon.
2. Kestrels are very valuable to us in the tropics. They primarily eat animals that we consider pests.
3. Reducing the amount of pesticides and chemicals we use to control pests will help the Kestrels and other important wildlife on our islands.
4. Remember it is illegal to, or attempt to; take, catch, possess, injure, harass, or kill any indigenous species. The only exceptions are for people holding valid permits from the Division of Fish and Wildlife
5. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
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